# Castlemaine Naturalist

## September 2014

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**Monthly newsletter of the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.**

Musk Duck, Crusoe Res. photo by Noel Young

## Death by Natural Causes

Max Schlachter

A talk on Evolution can really get you thinking. Graeme Watson's excellent presentation (with real slides - take that Powerpoint) at our August meeting did just that.

Graeme began with an illustration of continental drift. It showed Australia's journey from the single landmass of Pangea to become part of the much-evoked southern supercontinent of Gondwana. Then its separation from Antarctica and steady migration north ever since. Changes in Australia's climate as a result of this slow tectonic movement have been dramatic - the associated changes to our flora and fauna no less so.

It seems that for an evolutionary scientist, the extinction of an entire fauna is as natural as getting out of bed in the morning.

South America, Graeme told us, probably had a diverse marsupial fauna similar to Australia's once upon a time – before it 'bumped into' North America that is. Once a land bridge was formed between the two continents the Eutherian mammals (more highly evolved than marsupials) from North America trotted into South America's Gondwanan landscape and proceeded to make most of it's marsupial fauna history. A notable exception was Opossums, which even managed to get their own back by invading North America, where they are still found today.

It was at about this point in Graeme's talk that I really started thinking. My thoughts began to make my seat uncomfortable and I had to shift from side to side a bit.

If something as natural as continental drift could wipe out an entire fauna,

and if Australia is drifting naturally and inevitably towards South East Asia every day, then isn't threatened species conservation a bit of a waste of time? Won't the whole Australian continent be invaded by baboons, elephants, pandas and tigers soon enough anyway? What chance would a Bettong have against a Leopard?

For anyone that accepts evolution and continental drift, species conservation seems to require some justification!

I suspect that most Field Nats have crossed this bridge at some point in their life and have good reasons for believing in conservation - regardless of the fact that Kalimna Park will one day be a tropical jungle with monkeys swinging off the rotunda.

My first thought is usually that it is the time-frame that extinctions are happening in that is the problem. Recent extinctions, caused by humans, have happened in a fraction of time so small that in the grand scheme of things they would have to be called instantaneous.

There is also the fact that they have been quite obviously caused by human activity. Does that matter? We're just another mammal after all. I think it does, and so does our society if our laws are anything to go by. To use the legal lingo, a *death by natural causes* is treated very differently from an *unnatural death* – the cause of which may well be *criminal neglect*.

I hope Graeme and his slides will be back to talk again one day.

## Landcare Camp Out on The Mount 2014

Come to the Landcare Camp Out on The Mount and experience Mount Alexander in a whole new way. And if you're not the camping type, feel free to just come for the activities and head home Saturday evening.

**Camp Out activities will include:**

- the big 'pine purge' working bee in the afternoon (safe for adults and kids) to help stop pines taking over the native forest;
- a nature activity for children with Krista Patterson-Majoor from the Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests;
- a talk on some of Mount Alexander's interesting history by George Milford from the Harcourt Heritage Centre;
- barbecue dinner prepared by Harcourt Lions Club members;
- wildlife spotlighting walk with a Parks Victoria ranger;
- the Camp-fire Dessert Banquet. It will go well beyond marshmallows!

The Camp Out is an annual event organised by the Harcourt Valley Landcare Group & Parks Victoria with support from Connecting Country

and the Mount Alexander Shire Council. It aims to help stop the spread of invasive Radiata Pine trees in the Mount Alexander Regional Park.

The pines on Mount Alexander are native to California and are a legacy of commercial plantations that were once grown on Mount Alexander.

Surveys done by students from Victoria University in May 2014 found 920 pine trees growing in the Park, with almost half the area yet to be surveyed. It's already a lot of trees, and every year there are more coming up. This is changing the landscape and destroying important habitat for many native plants and animals.

The Camp Out will take place at the Leanganook camp ground on Mount Alexander on **Saturday 4th October.**

It is important to register your planned attendance with Max Schlachter at Connecting Country by emailing max@connectingcountry.org.au or phoning 03 5472 1594. More information can be found at www.connectingcountry.org.au/landcare.

**Mount Alexander will thank you for it - the pines won't!**

## Birding along the rivers

Damian Kelly

Over the past couple of years I have had a job that has taken me along the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin doing archaeological survey work. A nice perk of that travel has been the birds one comes across along the way. As I was surveying ancient indigenous fish trap sites it quickly became apparent that there was a close correlation between some trap locations and their bird fauna - specifically fish eating birds. Places like Brewarrina in northern NSW has been used for thousands of years, and not surprisingly a wide range of birds can be found there. Everything from herons to cormorants and kites are in big numbers.

Walking along the river early in the morning reveals a different mix of birds with several Nankeen Night-Herons along the edge of the water. At all times groups of Black Kites and a few Whistling Kites are to be found wheeling along the river - the numbers of raptors are quite surprising for those more familiar with our area where such raptor numbers are much lower.

At various places along the Murray are abandoned buildings reflecting much bigger farming populations than exist now. An example of this is the old Goodnight school downstream of Tooleybuc, NSW. On both sides of the river, but particularly in the old school grounds, I was thrilled to see groups of Grey-crowned Babblers.

Great Egret gliding along the river at Brewarrina

Nankeen Night-Heron waiting for breakfast on the river, and Grey-crowned Babblers at Goodnight, NSW

Right place, right time - a photographers dream! Sea-Eagle landing at Gum Swamp

Australasian Bittern taking off. Usually you are lucky to get a view like this.

Outback NSW is full of surprises. Gum Swamp just off the Newell highway near Parkes is at times teeming with birds, but the highlight for me was a pair of Sea-Eagles, a bird more often associated with coasts.

Although the encroachment of gigantic cotton farms has had a detrimental affect on the Macquarie Marshes, from time to time I was pleasantly surprised by the birds I saw. A rare and hard to see bird – the Australasian Bittern - can be found in the marshes, if you are very lucky. A lot of these areas are very sparsely populated and I suspect a lot of sightings are missed.

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## What's On ?

### 1 Loddon spring festival

The Loddon Shire has issued a spring festival calendar brochure covering events from 7 September to 26 October 2014.

The calendar incorporates a variety of activities for the nature enthusiast of all ages, such as the already established Kooyoora Wildflower Show, a detector key hunt, photographic exhibition, luncheon by the lake, wetlands tour, fishing competition, a showcase of primary industries, Naturally New Age Festival and Farmers Market, cycling race and activities in National and State Parks.

Look out for the brochure, or obtain further information from the Loddon Visitor Information Centre (5494 3489) or www.loddon.vic.gov.au

### 2 Angair Wildflower and Art weekend

This annual event will be held on **September 20 & 21** at the Anglesea Memorial Hall, McMillan St., Anglesea. The weekend includes spectacular displays of indigenous flowers, guided wildflower walks and bus tours, indigenous plants for sale, art and craft exhibitions, Hooded Plover activities, children's activities and more.

www.angair.org.au or contact - admin@angair.org.au or phone 5263 1085

Our traditional **Wednesday Wildflower walks** are scheduled to be held again this year during September and October.
(see page 8 for dates)

For each Wednesday, the appointed leader will decide on the best location at the time for wildflowers. We spend about an hour checking it out.

Meet at the Duke st. car park at 4.00 pm. Please be punctual.

Bring your plant brochure/ field guides, camera and notebook.
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# Observations

**At the August meeting -**

- George Broadway conveyed a list of plant species in flower from the Fryers Ridge, using some notes provided to him by Richard Piesse. These are from surveys by Richard and Ern (and Leslie?).
- George Broadway also described how one of his golfing partners, and fellow birdwatcher, Bob Cook, had observed Australasian Shelducks nest in a hollow tree. They are mostly ground-nesters, but a search of the literature by George/Bob revealed that they will occasionally nest in trees as well.
- Rita heard an unusual cuckoo call from her place in Barkers Creek on 26 July. She described it as six harsh descending notes. She suspects that it was a Brush Cuckoo. There was speculation and questions from the audience.
- Sue(?) reported a sighting of a Rainbow Lorikeet in Castlemaine This sparked much discussion from many other audience members about where else they'd been seen it in the local area. Seems to be increasingly common.
  - "4 seen in Harcourt today'
  - Nigel has never seen them in Sutton Grange
  - Rita saw them in forest once years ago
  - Christine Henderson occasionally sees them in Taradale
  - Seem to be common in WA flowering gums along roadside in Kangaroo Flat
  - Chris Morris sees them commonly in Castlemaine near his place
- Christine Henderson noted a large group of Yellow-tailed Black-cockatoos flying through Chewton area. Others have also seen this regularly. Believed to feed and roost in the pine forests
- Penny Garnett brought along an appropriately smelly specimen of the fungus Stickhorn (Ileodictyon cobarium), which was passed around the room
- Natalie de Maccus noted ducks on her roof making an unusual noise. Possibly in response to currawongs moving about nearby
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**Late August -**

- Rita has seen Ploughshare Wattle flowering
- Max and friends identified 42 species of wildflowers on a walk along the Leanganook section of the Goldfields track to Mt Alexander, using the Indigenous Plant Brochure for reference

**Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

# Castlemaine Field Naturalists
## Coming events

**Fri September 12 meeting:** speaker ERN PERKINS - Fabaceae, the native pea plants

**Sat September 13 field trip:** to Humboldt; leader Ern Perkins

**Wed September 17** **Wildflower walk** Leader Richard Piesse

**Wed September 24** **Wildflower walk** Leader Denis Hurley

**Wed October 1** **Wildflower walk** Leader Geraldine Harris

**Wed October 8** **Wildflower walk** Leader Rita Mills

**Fri October 10 meeting:** speaker TANYA LOOS; Daylesford nature diary

**Sat October 11 field trip:** Lushington Hill Reserve. leader Max Schlachter

### VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

**General meetings** - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 7.30 pm.

**Field Trips** - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

**Business meetings** - third Thursday of each month, except December, at George Broadways; 24a Greenhill Ave., at 6.00 pm. Members are invited to attend.

**Club website** - http://castlemainefnc.wordpress.com/

**Subscriptions for 2014**
Ordinary membership: Single $30, Family $40
Pensioner or student: Single $25, Family $30
Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

**2014 Committee**

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